

OPINION

GUEST ESSAY

Words Over Deeds: Why Biden Isn't Pressuring Israel

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Jack Richardson

One could be forgiven for thinking that President Biden's tough words on the Israel-Hamas war in his State of the Union address and his MSNBC interview on Saturday was the beginning of a

much more critical U.S. policy toward Israel. After all, the president called for at least a temporary cease-fire, laying out, in his most emotional terms to date, the losses and suffering of the people of Gaza and delivered an unmistakably sharp signal that Israel must make the delivery of humanitarian assistance to Gaza a priority. Those calls came on the heels of Vice President Kamala Harris's high-profile meeting with Benny Gantz, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's rival and likely successor — a snub to Mr. Netanyahu who has been denied a White House visit.

Nonetheless, far from presaging a major shift in policy, the president's words and the vice president's meeting were more likely part of the now familiar passive-aggressive approach the administration has deployed against the most extreme right-wing government in Israel's history.

President Biden has sent a number of signals — chastising Israel for indiscriminate bombing, assisting with airdrops and creating a maritime corridor for humanitarian assistance — that he's frustrated by some of Israel's actions, especially its inattention and even opposition at times to facilitating assistance into Gaza. He is further angered by Israel's unwillingness to restrain settler violence against West Bank Palestinians and its rejection of any role for the Palestinian Authority in governing Gaza. But he has consistently refused to impose any serious consequences on Israel.

Make no mistake. The "I'm unhappy with Israel but won't do much about it" policy is Mr. Biden's policy — driven by the president's pro-Israel sensibilities, politics and the policy choices he faces in dealing with the current war. At the same time, Mr. Biden surely knows that there are costs both at home and abroad for allowing Mr. Netanyahu to run roughshod over U.S. interests and values. Therein lies his dilemma.

Understanding why President Biden hasn't imposed costs on Israel during five months of its war against Hamas begins with his bond with the Jewish state.

Early in his career, it was easy for an impressionable young senator who made his first visit to Israel at age 30 to connect with the saga of Israel's struggle for independence and its fight for survival in a hostile neighborhood. In the years since, Mr. Biden has repeatedly [recalled](#) his father's references to the Holocaust and the dangers of silence in the face of evil. No other president describes himself repeatedly as a Zionist; no other occupant of the White House has [asserted](#) that if there were no Israel, "We'd have to invent one."

In short, Mr. Biden sees his own political life as intertwined with Israel's story. The extraordinary speech he gave three days after the Hamas terror attack on Oct. 7, and his visit to Israel within the first 10 days of war, set the frame. Bonding with the loved ones of those who had been murdered, the president spoke [from personal experience](#) about "the black hole" of loss, connecting the tragedies in his personal life with those of the people of Israel.

Mr. Biden may love Israel, but those feelings don't extend to the current prime minister of Israel. Even so, as Biden biographer Evan Osnos notes, the president's default position over the years has been not to confront Mr. Netanyahu, but to work with him when possible. As vice president, Mr. Biden even served as something of a conduit to the White House for Israelis during tense periods between Mr. Obama and Mr. Netanyahu, and counseled caution lest the White House push Mr. Netanyahu too far and force a rupture.

Recently, Mr. Biden's views have shifted as Palestinian deaths have mounted and the humanitarian situation in Gaza has turned

catastrophic. The president has been reportedly privately [disparaging](#) of the prime minister. It may well be that Mr. Biden now understands that Mr. Netanyahu is desperate to cling to power and, if necessary, will do so at the expense of American interests, regardless of Mr. Biden's extraordinary support and an ever climbing casualty count. Still, by many accounts, Mr. Biden is not yet ready to stop or condition military assistance to Israel or vote for a United Nations Security Council Resolution critical of Israel, let alone call for a permanent cease-fire unless it is linked to the return of the hostages.

If Mr. Biden's personal history and his past helped shape his support for Israel, domestic politics has reinforced his pro-Israel convictions. For Mr. Biden — and so many American politicians — the line between what's good for Israel and what's good for America has long been blurred. Being pro-Israel wasn't some craven genuflect for votes and money but a deeply held belief that good politics and good policy were one and the same, and supporting a fellow democracy fighting for survival in a dangerous neighborhood was exactly that. The president's decades in the Senate, where support for Israel runs high, reinforced this conflation.

As Israel drifted rightward in recent years, particularly during Mr. Netanyahu's 12-year-run as prime minister, all of that grew more complicated. Mr. Netanyahu's policies toward West Bank settlement growth and, later, his anti-democratic efforts to undermine the Israeli judiciary began to erode the two main pillars of the U.S.-Israeli relationship: shared interests and values.

At the same time, Mr. Biden now finds himself in a serious political bind. The Republican Party has emerged as the Israel-can-do-no-wrong party. And Democrats are increasingly torn: a large majority still strongly supports Israel, but a growing number

of progressives and mainstream Democrats are now calling for tougher action to restrain Mr. Netanyahu.

The results of the Michigan primary in February, with its significant number of [uncommitted votes](#), reflect an inconvenient reality for Mr. Biden: In a close general election, his unwavering support for Israel could cost him the election.

It's hard to see Mr. Biden undertaking some significant anti-Israel actions that move him from criticizing Mr. Netanyahu to renouncing him in the hope that those alienated by his pro-Israel policies would return to the fold. Should Mr. Biden's support for Israel waver, Republicans would clearly be eager to paint the president as anti-Israel, especially in an election campaign where the presumptive Republican nominee styles himself the most pro-Israel American president — ever. Nor is it clear how a concerted pressure campaign against the Netanyahu government would lead to a more positive outcome in the Israel-Hamas war.

And that leads us to the final element constraining Mr. Biden's policy choices, especially the use of serious leverage. The president may be increasingly uncomfortable with how Israel is waging this war and the appalling loss of life of innocent civilians, but he shares Israel's war aims: to both eliminate Hamas's capacity to pull off another Oct. 7 and end its sovereignty in Gaza.

Complicating matters further, this is not a conventional military conflict like the one in 1973 between Israel and Egypt, during which U.S. pressure and persuasion could work to produce agreements to end the conflict. It's a war against Iran-backed Hamas — a terror organization that seeks to replace Israel with an Islamic state; that engaged in a rampage of indiscriminate, sadistic killing and raping; and that holds hostages, many of whom are most likely still being abused. Some have died in captivity.

And that war is occurring in a densely populated area roughly twice the size of Washington, D.C., where Hamas has embedded its military assets around and under civilian structures and population.

If the president had a compelling alternative to how Israel could wage a war in these circumstances without doing grievous harm to civilians, he might have more leverage. Moreover, a large majority of Israelis, including Mr. Gantz, the administration's favorite candidate to succeed Mr. Netanyahu, support the war — all of which limits Mr. Biden's options for censuring the current prime minister.

Perhaps most important, Mr. Biden needs Mr. Netanyahu to agree to a hostage deal and an extended cease-fire with Hamas. Without that agreement, Mr. Biden cannot hope to de-escalate the war, increase humanitarian aid in a meaningful way, put an end to the devastating images out of Gaza and have a chance to pursue a broader peace deal between Israel and Saudi Arabia. As the war enters its sixth month, Mr. Biden finds himself in an investment trap that's difficult to escape. He is increasingly frustrated and angry with Mr. Netanyahu. And yet he's still in love with Israel. How to stand up to the first without damaging the second is proving to be an excruciatingly difficult challenge for a president whose regard for Israel runs deep in his emotional and political DNA and whose re-election campaign may depend upon which way he turns.

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